The Way for All

May 7, 2023, Easter 5

Acts 7: 54-60 Russell Mitchell-Walker

John 14: 1-14

When I was young, probably around 9 or 10, I remember hearing this story of the stoning of Stephen and it really left an impression on me. It’s a horribly violent story but that’s not what 9-year-old me remembers. It was Stephen’s faith and response that stood out to me. The fact that he would ask God to forgive the people who were killing him, to not hold this sin against them, witnessed to me a profound faith, that I knew I did not have, but wanted to aspire to. It was not lost on me that his words, “Jesus, receive my Spirit” and the “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”, were very similar to the words of Jesus from the cross: ‘Father, forgive them for they know not what they do”. It is an inspiring act of grace and mercy in the face of suffering.

Stephen was chosen to assist the apostles and because of his ability to preach and speak well, he moved to a higher position with the Apostles. He ran into trouble with the religious authorities for speaking truth to power, similar to Jesus. He called them out on their knowing of the Law but not living it out and not taking care of the people. He was a prophetic voice and a man of great faith who knew his scripture. Amid the rage of the religious authorities, Stephen gazed to heaven and experiences a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God, describing it for all who were there. In covering their ears, to avoid hearing Stephen, and rushing at him with a loud shout, the religious authorities remind one of a young child or immature person who doesn’t want to listen, covering their ears and making noise – ‘lalalalalala, not listening’. We can recall Jesus’ gospel refrain about having “eyes to see” and “ears to hear.” In the gospels, Jesus invites listeners to intentional awareness that God is up to something in the midst of everyday life, even for us, here! It is up to us, to be open to listening and seeing God in the midst of life, in our community, in our neighbourhood, and what God is up to. It is unfortunate that the religious authorities of Stephen’s time were not able or willing to do this.

Stephen’s gaze is prophetic and defiant. He refuses to be intimidated by the bullies and keeps focused on Jesus. He speaks hard truths to the leaders and does not gloss over the injustice he sees and experiences. His prophetic truth telling does not shy away from painful realities, but he does not focus his gaze or mind on the transgressors but keeps focused on Jesus. This is the transformation of love. It is what enables him to forgive the violence done against him as he dies.

The beginning of the gospel reading is often read at funerals – let not your hearts be troubled. Stephen understood this. Jesus is seeking to comfort the disciples as he talks about what he knows will happen and the suffering and death he will endure. He assures them that he is preparing a place for them, that there are many rooms in God’s house and one of them is for them. There is one for each of us too. It is a comfort to them and us. I think Jesus realizes he cannot take all the bad things away, so that our heart won’t be troubled, but when it is troubled, it can be less so because the bad things are not the end of the story. In the end there is love and peace and grace, no matter what.

Jesus then tells them that they know the way to the place he is going. As often is the case, the disciples seem to know less or understand less of what Jesus thinks they should know. They often don’t get it. So, when Thomas asks Jesus: “we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?” Jesus responds with an I AM message: ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ one of many in the gospel of John, that make known Jesus as the source of life, abundant grace, and, seen in connection with the absolute “I AM” statements, signal the very presence of God. I AM the bread of life; I AM the light of the world; I AM the door of the sheep; I AM the Good Shepherd; I AM the resurrection and the life; I AM the true vine. They connect with the proclamation of God in Moses’ encounter at the burning bush when Moses asks God, whom shall I say sent me? God responds I AM who I AM, which can also mean ‘I will be who I will be’. To single out this I AM statement as any more significant than the others is to misrepresent these statements of Jesus. Unfortunately, it has been singled out by some and used to proclaim an exclusiveness of Jesus as the only way to God.

That is not the intent of Jesus’ statement here. One commentator, states that if we see the ‘me’ in second part of the statement: ‘no one comes to the father except through me’ as the same as the I AM in the first statement it sheds a whole new light on the matter: ‘I AM the way the truth and the life. *No one comes to the Father, except through the way, the truth, and the life”.* The focus here is the way, the truth, the life of Jesus, not on Jesus. Thus, there are many faiths and traditions who live out the truth, the way, and life that Jesus proclaims. The early church community was known as People of the Way. I believe this is saying that all who live in love and truth and justice and compassion and peace, which Jesus taught and lived, are paths to God. This is consistent with Jesus’ message of love, inclusion, and grace.

Later in the passage Jesus tells them that if you believe in me, you will do the works that he does and even greater things, because he will be with us. These greater works must exhibit the way, the truth, the life that Jesus taught us about. It is bringing life and truth to and for communities that continue to be disconnected and denied access to all the areas that can bring abundant life such as quality food, access to medical care, affordable housing, and continued dignity no matter what their identities are.

This week at our Courageous Faith study group we heard from Leroy Barber, long-time anti-poverty and anti-racist activist and Methodist minister, about his work on Neighbourhood Economics. For him this is about addressing the enormous wealth gap in our communities that is causing us huge challenges. It is about the wealth we hold as assets over generations. The gap is especially stark between white and black communities in the US. For example, the average net worth of white families in the US is $150,000 and for Black families it is $24,000. He says if we don’t create equity around money and finances, we can’t create inclusive spaces. He calls us to challenge the stigma regarding talking about our finances. One concrete thing he said we can all do, is shift 20% of our spending to Black, Indigenous, People of Colour owned or operated businesses, communities, or organizations. It is things like hearing from Shylo Stevenson from Queen City Wellness Pharmacy at our Community Dinner last week to move our prescriptions to their pharmacy which supports them to do the work in the community to support those facing addictions and opioid overdoses. Did you know that Anytime Fitness are an Indigenous Organization, according to the [Indigenous Business Directory](https://saskchamber.com/programs/indigenous-engagement/indigenous-business-database/)? Are there supplies or services we use that we as Living Spirit Centre can buy from businesses run by Indigenous or racialized folk? These are the kinds of actions that we, as people of the way, can live out being truth and life to the community.

May Stephen’s faith be an inspiration to us all to keep our gaze fixed on Jesus and his love and grace. May we find hope in Jesus’ encouragement to not let our hearts be troubled, knowing that the suffering we experience is not the end. May we work to live the way of truth to give life for others, as Jesus did.